

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-02 INR-07 L-03

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R 011117Z DEC 76

FM AMEMBASSY DACCA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 2840

INFO AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI

AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD

AMEMBASSY COLOMBO

AMCONSUL CALCUTTA

AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 DACCA 6117

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, PGOV, BG

SUBJECT: GENERAL ZIA'S ASSUMPTION OF COMPLETE AUTHORITY

REF: DACCA 6081

1. SUMMARY: THREE SIGNIFICANT AND INTERRELATED EVENTS HAVE OCCURRED IN BANGLADESH IN THE PAST TEN DAYS: THE POSTPONEMENT OF PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS, GENERAL ZIA'S ASSUMPTION OF COMPLETE CONTROL AND THE ARREST OF ELEVEN PROMINENT POLITICIANS (SEPTEL). EACH EVENT OCCURRED WITH A MINIMUM OF PUBLICITY AND CAUSED LITTLE SURPRISE OR CONCERN AMONG THE PEOPLE. ZIA ACTED WHEN THERE APPEARED TO BE NO IMMEDIATE CRISIS AND HAS TAKEN RISKS IN BECOMING THE DIRECT RULER (WITH CREDIT FOR SUCCESS OR DISCREDIT FOR FAILURE ALMOST EQUAL POSSIBILITIES) AND IN BEING SEEN MORE CLEARLY AS A MILITARY DICTATOR BY INTERNATIONAL ONLMEKERS. ZIA MAY ATTEMPT TO ESTABLISH AN IMAGE OF BUSINESS-AS-USUAL AFTER SQUASHING WHAT HE SEEMS TO HAVE BEEN AS A POTENTIAL CHALLENGE TO HIS AUTHORITY FROM SOME POLITICIANS ANGRY AT BEING DENIED THE ANTICIPATED SPOILS OF VICTORY BY THE RECENT
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POSTPONEMENT OF PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS. END SUMMARY.

2. THE KEY TO UNDERSTANDING THE RECENT
EVENTS PROBABLY

LIES IN KNOWING THE REASONS FOR THE INDEFINITE POSTPONE-
MENT OF THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS. IN THE WEEKS BEFORE
THE POSTPONEMENT ANNOUNCEMENT, ZIA HAD TRAVELLED EXTEN-
SIVELY THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY, MEETING WITH LOCAL LEADERS
AND ASSESSING THE ENTHUSIASM FOR ELECTIONS. ZIA, IN
DISCUSSIONS WITH MISSION OFFICIALS, HAD MADE IT FAIRLY
CLEAR THAT HE FELT THAT A POLITICAL CAMPAIGN WOULD BE
DIVISIVE AND HARMFUL FOR THE COUNTRY, PARTICULARLY DIS-
COURAGING FOR HIM JUST WHEN ECONOMIC CONDITIONS WERE
IMPROVING AND THE GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATORS BEGINNING TO
TAKE MORE RESPONSIBILITY. HE ALSO MAINTAINED THAT HIS
CONCERNS WERE SHARED BY THE PEOPLE WHO ALSO WISHED TO
AVOID ELECTIONS. THE POSTPONEMENT DECISION CAME, THERE-
FORE, AS NO SURPRISE, ALTHOUGH SAYEM WAS UPSET THAT HIS
"PROMISE" OF ELECTIONS BY FEBRUARY, 1977, WAS BEING
DISCARDED. THE EDITORS, THE BUSINESSMEN, THE SO-CALLED
MAN-IN-THE-STREET, EVEN MOST OF THE POLITICIANS IN THE
MARGINAL PARTIES ACCEPTED THE POSTPONEMENT DECISION WITH
ENTHUSIASM. ONLY THE POLITICIANS OF THE MAJOR PARTIES,
THE AWAMI LEAGUE AND THE DEMOCRATIC LEAGUE, THOSE WHO
HAD HOPES OF GAINING POLITICAL OFFICE, DISLIKED THE
ANNOUNCEMENT. ALTHOUGH THOSE PARTIES DID NOT IMMEDIATELY
PROTEST, THEY CONTINUED TO HOLD ORGANIZATIONAL MEETINGS,
A SOMEWHAT UNUSUAL ACTIVITY CONSIDERING THAT THERE WAS
NOTHING ON THE HORIZON FOR WHICH TO ORGANIZE.

3. BECAUSE OUTDOOR, ACTIVITY CAMPAIGNING, ORIGINALLY
SCHEDULED TO COMMENCE FROM OCTOBER 1, HAD NEVER BEEN ALLOWED
TO BEGIN, INTENSE SPECULATION SPREAD IN DACCA THAT THE
ELECTIONS WOULD BE POSTPONED. AS THE WEEKS MOVED BY, IT
BEGAN TO APPEAR THAT THE MARTIAL LAW ADMINISTRATION,
MEANING ZIA, WAS INDECISIVE. ALSO, PEOPLE HAD EXPECTED
HIM TO ASSUME COMPLETE AUTHORITY IF AND WHEN ELECTIONS
WERE POSTPONED. THEREFORE, WHEN THE BELATED POSTPONE-
MENT ANNOUNCEMENT WAS MADE BY SAYEM, RATHER THAN ZIA,
THERE WAS SURPRISE THAT GENERAL ZIA SHOULD MAINTAIN SUCH
A LOW PROFILE. IT IS LIKELY THAT THOSE POLITICIANS,
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ESPECIALLY OF THE AWAMI LEAGUE AND EVEN MUSHTAQUE'S
PARTY, WHO EXPECTED TO REAP THE BENEFITS OF VICTORY
TOOK ADVANTAGE OF ZIA'S CAUTION TO CONTINUE TO ORGANIZE
AND EVEN TO MUTTER OMINOUSLY ABOUT FUTURE TROUBLE FOR
THE GOVERNMENT. MUSHTAQUE, FOR EXAMPLE, HAD ATTEMPTED
THE DAY BEFORE HIS ARREST TO CIRCULATE A STATEMENT VIGOR-
OUSLY OPPOSING THE POSTPONEMENT OF ELECTIONS. ZIA'S DE-
CISIVE MOVES SUGGEST THAT HE FELT IT WAS TIME TO REASSERT

HIS AUTHORITY BEFORE IT MIGHT BE CHALLENGED OPENLY BY THE POLITICIANS OR EVEN BY SAYEM, ALTHOUGH WE CANNOT BELIEVE EITHER CHALLENGE WOULD BE EFFECTIVE.

4. IN THE SHORT-TERM VIEW, NOTHING HAS REALLY CHANGED. ZIA HAS HAD THE DE FACTO POLITICAL POWER, HIS MOVES DO INDICATE THAT HE INTENDS TO CONSOLIDATE HIS AUTHORITY. IN THE NEXT FEW WEEKS THERE MIGHT BE SOME PROTEST ORGANIZED BY AWAMI LEAGUE AND DEMOCRATIC LEAGUE WORKERS. THE GREATER LIKELIHOOD, HOWEVER, IS THAT THE PARTIES WILL HAVE TO ACCEPT THE ARRESTS. OUR INITIAL SOUNDINGS REVEAL THAT MANY PEOPLE ARE DISAPPOINTED THAT ARRESTS HAD BECOME NECESSARY IN ZIA'S PLANS, BUT THERE IS NO INCLINATION TO DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT.

5. WHETHER ZIA CAN RETAIN HIS INCREASED AUTHORITY OVER THE LONG-TERM DEPENDS LESS ON THE POLITICIANS AND THE SO-CALLED WILL OF THE PEOPLE THAN IT DOES ON THE ATTITUDE OF THE ARMY. THE CENTER OF POLITICAL POWER, AND THE KEY TO GENERAL ZIA'S PROSPECTS, IS IN THE BARRACKS. OVER THE PAST FOUR MONTHS, IT HAS APPEARED THAT ZIA HAS MOVED CAREFULLY TO BUILD ARMY MORALE. HE HAS WORKED TO IMBUE THE FORMER FREEDOM FIGHTERS, A SOURCE OF LOYALTY TO HIM. HE CONSOLIDATED HIS CONTROL OF THE ARMY IN THE KEY DACCA MARTIAL LAW ZONE WHEN IN SEPTEMBER HE REPLACED MAJOR GENERAL DASTGIR, HEAD OF THE BD RIFLES AND PERHAPS A RIVAL TO ZIA, WITH MAJOR GENERAL MIR SHAWKAT ALI, A TRUSTED ALLY. IN A DISPLAY, SURELY CALCULATED, ZIA YESTERDAY, IN HIS FIRST PUBLIC ACT AS CHIEF MARTIAL LAW ADMINISTRATOR, REVIEWED THE SHARPLY-TURNED-OUT 9TH INFANTRY DIVISION, COMMANDED BY MAJOR GENERAL SHAWKAT, IN PERHAPS THE LARGEST PARADE IN RECENT MONTHS, AND THIS WAS FEATURED PROMINENTLY IN THE PRESS AND ON TV.

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 DACCA 6117

6. SEVERAL OF THE ARRESTED POLITICIANS WERE FROM THE BAKSAL FACTION OF THE AWAMI LEAGUE, THAT FACTION WHICH HAS BEEN KNOWN FOR ITS SYMPATHY TOWARD INDIA. ALTHOUGH ZIA IS PROBABLY QUITE SENSITIVE TO WHAT HE MIGHT INTERPRET AS AN "INDIAN CONNECTION" IN POSSIBLE PLOTS AGAINST HIM, IT WOULD SEEM UNLIKELY AT THE MOMENT FOR THIS TO BE EMPHASIZED. IN THE PAST FEW DAYS, THE MLA HAS ENDEAVORED TO SHOW THAT A GREAT DEAL WAS ACCOMPLISHED AT THE UNITED NATION IN BANGLADESH'S

POSITION VIS-A-VIS INDIA. WITH TALKS BEGINNING DECEMBER 6, IT IS UNLIKELY THE POSSIBLE "INDIAN CONNECTION" OF THE BAKSALITES WILL BE PLAYED UP IMMEDIATELY.

7. CONCLUSION: IT SEEMS LIKELY THAT ZIA WILL MAKE EVERY EFFORT TO CREATE THE APPEARANCE OF CONTINUITY AND STABILITY FOR HIS GOVERNMENT. SAYEM STILL RETAINS THE FIGUREHEAD POSITION AS DE JURE HEAD OF GOVERNMENT, BUT BEYOND ANY ANNOUNCEMENT OF RESIGNATION HE IS UNABLE TO MOUNT ANY EFFECTIVE CHALLENGE TO THE CHANGE. GENERAL ZIA'S INTERNATIONAL REPUTATION AS A BENIGN LEADER MAY SUFFER CONSIDERABLY AS HE APPEARS MORE IN
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THE ROLE OF A "MILITARY DICTATOR". HE HAS OVERNIGHT LOST MUCH OF THE "COVER" PROVIDED BY THE CIVILIAN SAYEM (AND WILL LOSE ALL OF IT IF SAYEM DEPARTS FROM PRESIDENTIAL OFFICE). ZIA'S RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE GOVERNANCE OF BANGLADESH, BOTH SUCCESSES AND FAILURES, IN MORE DIRECT AND A FAILURE WOULD FALL SQUARELY TO HIS DISCREDIT AND TO THE MILITARY.
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